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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the future of communication research and instruction in an age when the communication environment is under stress from such factors as communication overload, language "pollution," and a widespread and growing disregard for truth. Items related to the general thesis are considered from three perspectives: the role of government in the free flow of information, the erosion of commitment to truth (and related "pollutions" of the language), and the educational challenge of achieving communication literacy in a changing world. (AA)

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COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND INSTRUCTION FOR AN UNCERTAIN TOMORROW

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August 19, 1977

My thanks to Darrell Piersol for inviting me to be here. I welcome the opportunity to become a bit better acquainted with this lovely part of the country.

Standing up in front of an audience and asking them to pay attention to you for twenty or twenty-five minutes is an awesome responsibility. Whenever, in a public speaking situation, I feel in danger of taking myself too seriously, I remind myself of a study that was carried out, purportedly, some years ago by the American Psychological Association. That study revealed that, on the average, in a public speaking situation only 28% of the audience members are paying attention to the speaker. And they also found out that, of the remaining 72%, more than half are entertaining erotic thoughts.

I suspect that here in Boone, if we are not in the "Bible Belt," we are not far from it. If you will bear with me, like the preacher on Sunday morning, I am going to preface my remarks with three short texts.

The first is from the Old Testament, Judges, chapter 12, verse 6; "Then said they unto him, say now Shibboleth: and he said, Sibboleth, for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him."

And from the New Testament, Luke, chapter 19, verse 22; "Out of thine own mouth will I punish thee."

And finally, from the new New Testament, the New York Times: "When any branch of Government consistently and systematically lies to us, it has committed the highest form of treason; it has truly subverted the nation and overthrown it from within." (Richard J. Donahue)

And like the preacher, I will leave it to you to make the connection between

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these texts and what is about to follow.

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We live in an age of environmental consciousness. Belatedly, we have become aware of serious threats to both our physical environment and to our own physical well-being: air and water pollution; drought; the decay of our cities; an exploding world population; the depletion of certain natural and physical resources; energy and food shortages; and the threat of nuclear war in a world in which the growing tensions between the "haves" and the "have-nots" demand resolution.

We are perhaps less aware that we also live in a communication environment -- and that that environment, too, is under considerable stress. For example:

1) We suffer from communication overload: the frustrations brought about by our inability to absorb and make use of the available information that is relevant to our interests and needs.

2) Language pollution: an apparent decay in the ability of our basic symbol system -- language -- to serve our individual and social needs. More at fault than the symbol system itself is our seeming inability to foster true communicative competence among the citizenry at-large. Even in a wealthy, developed society like ours, there are large numbers of persons who are deficient in reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills.

3) Although difficult to document, there seems to be a widespread and growing disregard for the truth. As Jim Hayes said in his keynote address yesterday, "All communication is useless unless you tell the truth."

These are a few of the symptoms of an ailing communication environment. I am not prepared to offer a prescription for what is needed. But I'd like to share a few thoughts about today's communication environment -- and hazard a few guesses about some changes in it that seem likely for tomorrow. For the most part, I'll leave it to you to draw your own conclusions about the implications for research

and instructional development.

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I've chosen -- somewhat arbitrarily -- to look at our communication environments from three limited perspectives: (1) the role of government in the free flow of information; (2) the erosion of commitment to the truth -- and related pollutions of the language; and (3) the educational challenge of achieving communication literacy in a changing world.

Like most of our society's organizations and institutions, the government is undergoing a crisis of public confidence. And well it might -- with Viet Nam; Watergate; unnerving revelations about the activities of the FBI and the CIA; Congressional scandals involving bribery, voting frauds, misuse of public funds, not to mention more frivolous forms of hanky-panky; cynicism and apathy among the voters; an apparent inability to cope with the crushing social problems of the day -- like minority unemployment; and so on, and so on.

Francis Gary Powers was buried in Arlington Cemetery last week. From the notorious U-2 incident in which he was a relatively innocent participant, we learned that a highly respected President of the United States -- Dwight Eisenhower -- and a highly respected Ambassador to the United Nations -- Adelai Stevenson -- were capable of telling bald-faced lies to the American people.

The growth of central government has brought with it a mixture of good and bad consequences. The impact on our communications has been profound:

1) Item. The Federal Communications Commission -- the FCC -- tries to maintain some sense of order in our overcrowded electromagnetic frequency spectrum. As appears to be the case with many regulatory agencies, the FCC has been more solicitous of the industry that it regulates than it has been of the "public good." Specifically, in protecting the interests of commercial broadcasters, the FCC has unnecessarily restricted the access rights of the people to a broader sampling of news, information, and entertainment.

2) Item. The government is far and away the largest publisher of printed materials and the largest producer of films in the United States. This represents an awesome power. What the government decides to report objectively -- and what it decides to shade or alter or withhold altogether -- is of enormous consequence to the American people's right to know.

Concrete Example: A report of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition was released last January. In the interests of better health for all Americans, it called for substantial reductions in our dietary intakes of fat, sugar, cholesterol, and salt. The publication has already been withdrawn -- reportedly because of the successful lobbying efforts of the beef, sugar, and egg farm blocs. The essential question is whether the American people are entitled to examine all viewpoints on a particular issue -- including those of both special interest lobbies and disinterested scientists -- and then make up their own minds.

3) Item. The government is not only the largest single producer of information, but it is also the largest consumer. Dan Lacy, Senior Vice-President of McGraw-Hill Publishers, recently hazzarded the guess that close to half of all dollars used to purchase books in this country are tax dollars. Again, think of the enormous power -- the power to influence -- that goes with being both the chief creator and the chief purchaser of publications.

4) Item. Thanks to computerized data banks of criminal records, Internal Revenue Service records, Social Security records, Veterans records, health care records, and so on -- the government is in an increasingly stronger position to: a) keep an eye on each of us; b) infringe upon our rights of privacy; and c) inhibit our freedoms by intimidation.

5) Item. Consider the U.S. Postal Service and the impact of its regulations, its rate structures, its inefficiencies (to say nothing of its complicity in illegally opening first-class mail) -- think of the impact of all of these factors on the flow of information in our country.

6) Item. It is illegal for American citizens to be given free access to the information generated by the United States Information Agency -- with our tax dollars -- for consumption abroad. As I understand it, it takes a specific act of Congress in order to show on American television a film that has been created, for example, for a Near East Arab audience.

7) Item. Although the Freedom of Information Act has permitted many persons to gain access to information formerly withheld by the government, many Federal agencies have developed mechanisms for subverting the law's basic intent. Timing the release of information to have a maximum self-serving political impact is, we are told, a highly developed skill in Washington.

8) Item. Similarly, the Privacy Act, which is designed to protect the rights of individual citizens with respect to Federal records is frequently circumvented by such simple means as changing the classification of a file from "permanent" to "temporary" so that it is exempt from public scrutiny. This is not unlike the practice of "classifying" information that is not related to national security as a means for covering up governmental inefficiency or poor judgment or wrong-doing.

9) Item. Decisions of the Burger Court have severely limited our Fifth Amendment rights -- including the right to remain silent before a court, a grand jury, or an investigative committee.

10) Item. Less than half of the American taxpayers are able to comprehend their Federal tax forms sufficiently well to complete them without help.

One could go on -- and on and on. But it is only fair to mention some of the developments within government that have improved the communication environment.

1) The so-called Sunshine Laws that require deliberative bodies to conduct a major part of their business in public strengthen the democratic process.

2) Disclosure laws that require officials to reveal their assets and business connections help to guard against conflicts of interest.

3) Freedom of travel is one of the most important communication freedoms. Lifting restrictions on travel to such countries as Cuba and China is a constructive development.

4) The new Federal copyright law will, we are told, encourage the creation of books and other literary and artistic works on the part of individuals from the private sector.

5) Court rulings protecting the First Amendment rights of the press -- including those of investigative reporters -- have helped to strengthen the right of the public to know.

6) Relaxation of the "equal time" regulations made the Carter-Ford debates possible -- even if they were considerably less vigorous and free-swinging than most of us would have liked.

7) Although our senators and representatives have not given up their right to censor, amend, and alter their own remarks -- before they appear in the Congressional Record -- effective this September, the Record will at least be edited in such a way that it will be possible to know what was and what was not actually said on the floor.

8) Truth in lending laws; unit pricing regulations; removing the restrictions on advertising on the part of lawyers and doctors -- all help to make available to the people information to which they are entitled.

9) The recent Court rulings -- and others like them -- affirming the right of the people to have access to the Nixon tapes help in the continuing effort to encourage an electorate that is better informed.

Government is big -- and Jimmy Carter notwithstanding -- it is almost certain to get bigger. As a healthy counterbalance to big government, we need a vigorous private sector including voluntary groups that can monitor legislation and government regulations in the public interest. And we must not forget, of course, that we <u>are</u> the government -- or at least the government is what we allow it to be. So

much for government.

Dr. Ewald Nyquist, until very recently the Commissioner of Education in New York State, reminded us that, in the last analysis, there are only three things that are really worth pursuing: goodness, beauty, and truth. He's right, but it's a difficult task because your goodness and your beauty and your truth are not necessarily my goodness and my beauty and my truth.

Within the last year or so, three similar cartoons have appeared in the New Yorker magazine. In each, the scene is a court of law and a witness is being sworn in by the court clerk. In the first cartoon, the clerk says, "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth -- as you see it?"

In the second one, the clerk is saying, "Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth -- in exchange for immunity?"

And in the most recent one, this month, the clerk is holding the Bible with one hand and snapping his fingers rhythmically with the other hand, as he says, "Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the truth, the truthity, truth truth!?"

These New Yorker cartoons -- which, incidentally were drawn by different artists --reflect an awareness of what one might call the erosion of good old-fashioned, unvarnished truth.

Permit me one very brief story that is to the point. A corporation was checking out three different accounting firms with a view to retaining one of them. Each representative was asked the same question: "How much is two plus two?" The first two accountants each answered, "Four." But the third one -- obviously a winner -- said, "Well, gentlemen, what figure did you have in mind?"

In a country that has cultivated and cherished such pleasant myths as George Washington's "I cannot tell a lie!" and Abe Lincoln's five-mile hike to return a two-cent overcharge -- evidences of deviousness, deception, duplicity, and massive distortions of the truth are hard to accept. Is honesty still the

best policy -- or is it just for suckers? When Jimmy Carter said, "I will never lie to you," did he mean to say that he will always be open and above-board with the American people?

The preservation and encouragement of the truth is everybody's business. But I believe that it is especially the business of communicators -- and of those who assume the responsibility for educating communication professionals.

The word "rhetoric" today is often used in a negative, pejorative way, as in "mere campaign rhetoric." But this is a distortion of the word's original meaning. The art and practice of rhetoric -- the framing of persuasive messages -- cannot be separated from the underlying requirement of maintaining high ethical standards in that art and practice. It was Quintilian (or was it Aristotle?), centuries ago, who defined rhetoric as the virtuous man speaking well.

The very act of communicating with others involves a sharing -- a giving and receiving relationship -- that is essentially a moral act. The German philosopher Nietsche pointed out that "Truth begins when there are two." In other words, we begin to grope our way toward the truth as we try out our ideas against those of others -- through inquiry, discussion, argument.

Do we have cause to be concerned about the status and prospects for the survival of truth in our society? I think so.

Item. Six or seven years ago, then Attorney General John Mitchell said, "You will be better advised to watch what we do instead of what we say." In a remarkable display of candor, he warned us that the Nixon Administration could be expected to lie to the American people.

Item. A few years later, Press Secretary Ron Zeigler dismissed lying on the part of government officials by simply declaring their statements to be "inoperative."

Item. In a speech about a year ago, Martin Klotsche, Chancellor Emeritus of the University of Wisconsin, warned: "There is a growing distrust and suspicion

in our society of those who seek the truth. We should not take lightly the pressures in our society for conformity and the discouragement of dissent and idiosyncrasy which surround us. If we allow this mood to prevail, it will convert us into a nation of mental robots."

Item. Psychiatrist Irving D. Harris recently observed that lying is on the increase in the nation as a whole because of a general relaxation of moral standards. He noted that there is even a certain amount of admiration that goes with ripping off society. His prescription: "Lying should be the exception rather than the rule." (Oh, Hippocrates!)

Item. A 1977 report by the Sentry Insurance people found that 46% of the public thinks that most or all of television advertising is "seriously misleading."

Item. Kingman Brewster, the distinguished and respected President of Yale University, has recently been appointed Ambassador to Great Britain. Said he to this year's Yale graduates: "I am about to enter a profession whose public utterances, as someone said, are somewhere between a cliche and a falsehood."

Item. A well-established New York City criminal lawyer recently appeared on the "Today" show to reveal his frustration and despair about the sorry state of the quest for justice in our courts. The prosecutor doesn't look for the truth, he looks for a conviction. The defense attorney isn't interested in the truth; he's paid to get an acquittal. And the judge seems less concerned with the truth than with clearing the docket and getting on with the next case. According to this attorney, our adversary system of justice is a poor servant of the truth.

Item. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of American college freshmen feel that the college administration has the right to restrict the appearance of speakers on campus.

I hope my point is clear. It's the point Jim Hayes was making, "First there's truth!" The pursuit of the truth is very difficult. But difficult or not, it

is a pursuit of central importance to the communication profession. As Tom Wicker observed in the New York Times: "If it is a conceit for men to believe that . . . they can discern a singular and indisputable truth, verdicts still have to be reached. The very elusiveness of truth makes human judgment the necessary substitute." And if we are to have sound judgments, we must have reasoned deliberation.

There are other pollutants in our communication environment, one of which is the abuse of language. The use of jargon is one such abuse.

The parents of a Houston high school student received the following message from the Principal concerning a special meeting on a proposed new educational program. The message read: "Our school's cross-graded, multi-ethnic, individualized learning program is designed to enhance the concept of an open-ended learning program with emphasis on a continually enriched learning using the identified intellectually gifted child as the agent or director of his own learning. Major emphasis is on cross-graded, multi-ethnic learning, with the main objective being to learn respect for the uniqueness of a person."

The parent wrote the Principal: "I have a college degree, speak two foreign languages and four Indian dialects, have been to a number of county fairs and three goat ropings, but I haven't the faintest idea as to whatinthehell you are talking about!"

And English Professor Lawrence Langer's comment in a recent Chronicle of Higher Education is to the point: "It is little wonder that human beings have so much trouble saying what they feel, when they are told that there is a specialized vocabulary for saying what they think. The language of simplicity and spontaneity is forced to retreat behind the barricades of an official prose developed by a few experts who believe that jargon is the most precise means of communication. The results would be comic, if they were not so poisonous; unfortunately, there is an attitude toward the use of language that is impervious to human need and drives some people back into silence when they realize the

folly of risking human words on insensitive ears."

Frank Mankiewicz writes about word inflation -- about our inability to believe what we read and hear and see because of chronic exaggeration. He wrote as follows after Jimmy Carter likened the energy crisis to a war: "And when a trip to New York on the Eastern shuttle -- a battered Convair prop jet at that -- is described as coming to us from the'Wings of Man,' all pompous words are scorned. After twenty years of 'The Heartbreak of Psoriasis,' the energy program just has to be a 'crisis' or a 'war.'"

In recent years, there has been a general hue and cry about the decline of literacy in our population. Johnny can't read, he can't write, he's a poor listener, and he can't express himself orally. The educational establishment has been regularly and roundly and properly faulted for this failure to teach the skills of literacy. It has even been suggested -- and this is a truly frightening thought -- that there are those in our society whose vested interests would be threatened, if we were to achieve universal literacy.

In his recent book about the press, reporter Frank Cannon accuses the newspaper business of having built-in biases for sensationalism, superficiality, and, most important, false objectivity -- being factual instead of being truthful.

There isn't time to talk about TV violence, but the evidence that excessive violence on the screen blunts our sensitivity to it in real life -- and, in some cases, induces violent behaviors in viewers -- continues to mount. Margaret Mead, testifying recently before a Congressional group, expressed her belief that one of the most serious effects of TV on children is the fact that, being essentially non-participative --it induces passivity in the young. To use Milton Mayer's phrase, the electronic media -- essentially one-way media -- have transformed communication into uni-munication. The passivity that television seems to induce is epitomized by this tag line on a radio commercial that you may have heard in

recent weeks: "Regardless of what you want to say, there's an American Greetings card that will express your feelings exactly!"

TV is a phenomenon of the past 30 years. Prior to 1948 it was available to only a very small part of the population. But as early as 1938, when it was little more than a laboratory curiosity or something to be demonstrated at a world's fair, author E. B. White, with truly remarkable foresight, wrote as follows: "We shall stand or fall by television. Of that I am quite sure. . . . Television sounds may become more familiar to us than their originals. A door closing, heard over the air; a face contorted, seen in a panel of light -- these will emerge as the real and the true; and when we bang the door of our own cell or look into another's face, the impression will be mere artifice."

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I hope that some implications for future research and instruction in communication have surfaced from this rather spotty inventory of the communication scene. Perhaps you can agree with me on the following:

1) We need to continue our efforts to identify the kinds of knowledge, the kinds of functional abilities, and the guiding values that are needed to cope communicatively in a rapidly changing communication environment -- and we need to infuse these findings into our educational programs.

2) Through education, we can encourage a greater understanding and respect for our very fragile communication freedoms. We can nurture them at home and perhaps we can even help to extend them to areas of the world where they are still largely unknown.

3) The present -- and soon to be realized technological wonders in communication are awesome: instant satellite telecommunications; inexpensive, high-capacity, in-the-home data processing; lasers and masers and radio-telescopes; optical fiber transmission; the whole gamut of microtechnologies; and so on. For all of these scientific wonders, we still know next to nothing about that most

truly remarkable information processor -- the human brain. Its capacity -- it can process over a billion messages a minute -- strains the imagination. It has an almost unlimited memory capacity. As a recent Bell System advertisement put it: "This machine (and the picture was of a man using a telephone) communicates over 150 words per minute across oceans at less than 1½ cents per word. And also listens, reacts, sympathizes, charms, persuades, pleads, cajoles, apologizes, needles, soothes, explores, informs, explains, and does whatever else it takes to solve the problem or close the sale."

4) It seems clear that science and technology will not — cannot -- provide all of the answers. We need also the insights of the humanists and the artists, for they sometimes see farther, see more clearly, and see things more whole. We need to learn to synthesize the more precise, but limited, findings of science with the softer more amorphous insights of artistic and humanistic observers. And we will need to repair our interdisciplinary communication channels in order to accomplish it. As J. W. Tukey has observed: "Far better an approximate answer to the right question, which is often vague, than an exact answer to the wrong question, which can always be made precise."

Ernest L. Boyer is the new United States Commissioner of Education. He and an associate, Martin Kaplan, have a new book entitled Educating for Survival. In it, they address themselves to the fundamental learnings that will be increasingly important in tomorrow's world: "Symbols are central to existence. So fundamental that it is often overlooked is the fact that people are socially bound together by the sending and receiving of messages through sight and sound and touch. The process is mutual and essential. It goes far beyond the personal need to learn to write and speak clearly and connectedly, learning to decode the messages of others. We are, in fact, bombarded by signals -- exhorting us to think, live, feel, believe, and act in certain ways. Our knowledge is embodied and conveyed

in symbols. Our internal conversations with self, and our communications with others, are all mediated by the complex miracle of language -- language in the broadest sense. That we are all inhabitants of a linguistic space is the rationale for including an approach to communication in the common core."

Specialists often believe that their own specialty is the path to Nirvana. The psychologist, the environmentalist, the economist, the political scientist, the neurobiologist -- and the communication scholar -- are often convinced that the answers to social problems, large and small, lie within the frame of their own discipline. More sophisticated communication concepts, theories, and models will not solve our problems. But they can help. We need to fashion new tools that will address themselves to the problems we are facing, rather than, as we academics so often do, insisting upon defining problems in terms of the tools that we already have available.

Dr. Jack Matthews, Chairman of the Department of Speech at the University of Pittsburgh, taught me an important lesson a number of years ago. A group of us representing several disciplines were trying to figure what might be done about the "language problems of the disadvantaged." Jack's point was that for all our expertise about dialects and linguistics and alternate communication systems, we, the advantaged, could probably help our disadvantaged neighbors more, if we could demonstrate some real concern for their basic <u>needs</u> in our society — find ways of sharing with them the <u>abundance</u> of our society — jobs, housing, better health care, and so on. With those needs satisfied, he suggested, many of our so-called language problems would take care of themselves. His point is still well taken.

As 1984 approaches, the realities of George Orwell's "double-speak" and "double-think" become more apparent. Protecting and improving the communication environment won't <u>solve</u> our problems, but it can help. The responsibility rests with everyone. Communication teachers and researchers, it seems to me, have a special role to play.

Thank you.